Saint Peter’s Needle:
The Vatican Obelisk and Its Importance in Renaissance Rome

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Jacqueline T. Kordinak
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This thesis titled

Saint Peter’s Needle:
The Vatican Obelisk and Its Importance in Renaissance Rome

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ABSTRACT

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Saint Peter’s Needle: The Vatican Obelisk and Its Importance in Renaissance Rome

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This study is about the Vatican obelisk, its history and ties to one of the most prominent popes of the Renaissance, Sixtus V, who restructured roads and pilgrimage routes throughout Rome using obelisks as beacons to guide travelers to holy shrines. The Vatican obelisk was perfectly situated for the commencement of Sixtus’ plan to make it a Christian symbol of the strength and endurance of Catholicism. In choosing ancient Egyptian monuments as the new symbols to embody the triumph of the reformed Catholic Church, Sixtus gave Christian meaning to these colossal stones by linking them to Apostles and Christian relics, and he thus created a Christian lineage for the obelisks that assured their permanent place in Rome’s history and urban landscape.
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For those I lost along the way, Jack and Paula
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INTRODUCTION

In the year 37 CE, Emperor Gaius Caligula (reigned 37-41) decided to move a giant red monolith from Egypt to Rome, where it became part of the circus (racecourse) that was begun by Caligula and enlarged by Nero (reigned 54-68). This single piece of stone, later known as the Vatican obelisk (Figure 1), is the focus of this study, which will examine issues related to why and how it became the centerpiece of the Piazza San Pietro and what it meant allegorically for the Catholic Church of sixteenth-century Rome. While the monolith has a rich history both in Egypt and in ancient Rome, during the Counter-Reformation the obelisk had immense importance for Catholics because it symbolized the endurance of the Roman Church.

To understand the Vatican obelisk’s significance in sixteenth-century Rome, we must view it across a broad frame of time from its origin in Egypt to the papacy of Pope Sixtus V (1585-1590). The monolith has been important to more than one culture and it has been altered to express the values of several. Three distinct cultures have claimed ownership of the obelisk, from the Egyptians who made it, to the imperial Romans, whose practice of acquiring spolia (Latin, meaning spoils) brought it to Rome, and, finally, the Catholic Church, which made it a beacon of faith. Throughout its history in Rome, the Vatican obelisk has been one of the city’s most astounding treasures. Untold numbers of Romans and tourists have marveled at the monument, which is more than three thousand years old.

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1 For references to the Vatican circus, see Pliny, *Natural History*, XXXVI.XV, and Tacitus, *The Annals*, XIV.
During the Renaissance, many humanists in Italy became fascinated with Egyptian history and lore and especially intrigued by the monumentality and antiquity of obelisks. Prior to the late fifteenth century, however, they knew little about the fallen obelisks in Rome, although fragments of the monoliths protruded from the ground. We know from the 1527 *Antiquitates Urbis* by Andreas Fulvius that stones had been unearthed and placed near the church of San Rocco. At that time, no one was capable of re-erecting these stones and so for years they lay there. In 1585, when Pope Sixtus V set his mind on installing the Vatican obelisk in front of the Basilica of Saint Peter, he was also intent on finding the lost obelisks of Rome. The success of his mission bolstered the Catholic Reform and changed the appearance of the city of Rome, hinged as it was on the triumphant raising of the Vatican obelisk in Saint Peter’s square.

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3 Ibid., 50.
CHAPTER 1: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE VATICAN OBELISK

Almost no recorded information remains concerning the creation and early history of the Vatican obelisk, but it was likely cut in the quarries at Aswan in southern Egypt (about seven hundred miles from Alexandria). We know that it was erected in Heliopolis because in the first century BCE, soon after he conquered Egypt (30 BCE), Emperor Octavian (Augustus) asked for the monolith to be taken from Heliopolis to Alexandria and erected by Cornelius Gallus in the Forum Julium. It was again moved following the death of Augustus’ successor, Tiberius (reigned 14-37), by the new Roman emperor, Gaius Caligula, who had the obelisk shipped to Rome. In his *Natural History*, dated around 77-79, Pliny the Elder (lived 23-79) wrote that the obelisk was in Rome in the Circus (the racecourse) of Caius (Gaius) and Nero.

Transporting this large obelisk from Egypt to Rome was a considerable feat. The ancient Romans were able to accomplish this task because of their consummate skill as builders, able to design and construct immense obelisk-ships that could carry heavy monoliths up the Nile and across the Mediterranean to Italy. Centuries later, it would seem nearly impossible for the people of the Renaissance to move the Vatican obelisk even a short distance over ground.

The Vatican obelisk is one of the very few without hieroglyphs on its shaft. According to Erik Iversen, this was because it served as a cult object for sun worship at

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5 Pliny, *Natural History*, XXXVI.XV. Pliny writes that the obelisk was made by the pharaoh Nuncoreus (son of Sesoes).
Heliopolis. He notes that an inscription in bronze letters is known to have existed on the pedestal prior to its removal from Egypt. This inscription, which honored Cornelius Gallus for creating the Julium Forum at Alexandria, was removed “soon after 26 B.C., when Gallus fell into disgrace.” Another inscription was placed on the shaft of the obelisk and is still visible. It reads as follows:

DIVO CAESARI DIVI IVLII F(ilio) AVGVSTO
T(iberio) CAESARI DIVI AVGVSTI F(ilio) AVGVSTO
SACRVM.

It is not known when this inscription was added, or whether it was added in Egypt or in Rome. It can be argued that when Caligula ordered the monument erected, he had the shaft inscribed as a reference to his predecessor, the Emperor Tiberius. But why he would have done this is puzzling since Caligula and Tiberius were rivals and enemies. The Roman historian Suetonius (lived 69-122) wrote in his De vita Caesarum that Tiberius was responsible for the deaths of Caligula’s parents and brothers, Nero and Drusus, which makes it seem doubtful that Caligula would have ordered the dedicatory inscription. Considering the hatred that Caligula had for Tiberius, it is more likely that the inscription was present before the obelisk and base were moved to Rome. This animosity may explain why the obelisk was erected in the circus with the dedicatory inscription.

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7 Iversen, Exile, 19.
8 Ibid, 20. Iversen believes that the inscription was removed due to Gallus’ loss of favor as well as his suicide. For the inscription, see Erik Iversen, “The Date of the So-called Inscription of Caligula on the Vatican Obelisk,” The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology 51 (Dec. 1965): 149.
10 Iversen, Exile, 20.
facing the direction it did, as it appears in drawings and prints showing its original position. According to Iversen, when Gaius Caligula imported the obelisk, he placed it inside the Roman circus so that the inscription about Tiberius would face the hemicycle and carceres (starting gates) of the arena in order to hide the inscription from the view of those attending the racecourse.

The object was considered a *spolia* from Egypt, and the inscription was important to the Renaissance because it tied the obelisk to Emperor Augustus. In the Middle Ages, however, legends and superstitions grew around the ancient monuments of Rome. One erroneous tradition linked the ashes of Julius Caesar to the obelisk. This idea was recorded in a pilgrim’s guidebook dated to about the middle of the twelfth century, the *Mirabilia Urbis Romae*. Here we read that the ashes of Caesar are in his sarcophagus within the orb at the summit of the Needle (the obelisk) “so that, as in his lifetime the whole world lay subdued before him, even in death the world would lie beneath him forever.” One can see how this fable could have come about from a misunderstanding of the inscription on the shaft concerning which Caesar the inscription was made to honor. In the sixteenth century when the obelisk was moved to the front of Saint Peter’s, the bronze orb was removed to determine the truth of this legend; it was

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13 Ibid., 21-22.
14 *Mirabilia Urbis Romae*, trans. and ed. by Francis Morgan Nichols, 2nd ed., with new introduction, gazetteer and bibliography by Eileen Gardiner (Ellis and Elvey: London and Spithover, Rome, 1889; repr. New York: Italica Press, 1986), Part III. This guide also cites an inscription that was purportedly on the orb: “Caesar, who once was great as is the world / Now in how small a cavern art thou enclosed.”
15 Brian Curran, Anthony Grafton, Pamela O. Long, and Benjamin Weiss, *Obelisk: A History* (Cambridge: Burndy Library, 2009), 64, states that the idea expressed in the *Mirabilia* that Caesar’s ashes were in the orb reflects a misreading of the inscription on the obelisk as well as confusion between the obelisk and the column that Suetonius refers to in his *The Life of Caesar* as having been erected in the Forum to honor Caesar after his death. Moreover, according to Michael Greenhalgh, *Donatello and His Sources* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1982), 146, people during the Middle Ages believed that obelisks, like the pyramids of Egypt, were connected with burials.
inspected by Pigafetta at the Vatican Belvedere, where he discovered that the orb contained no ashes at all.  

This obelisk is different from others in Rome; it is the only one to have remained standing throughout the fall of the Roman Empire and the rise of the Christian Church. Iversen thought it “a direct consequence of its connection with the early history of Roman Christianity that the obelisk was not overturned like all its fellows,” and I concur that this may have saved it from damage. Unlike the other obelisks in Rome, this obelisk was rooted in Christian history because of its physical proximity to the grave of Saint Peter.

In the Middle Ages, the site of Peter’s grave in Rome became one of the major destinations for pilgrims who went on journeys to witness relics at holy sites. Rome was the site of many stories recorded by the early Christian writers and the city played a central role in the history of the Church. According to Eusebius (263-339 CE), Bishop of Caesarea, many Christians were persecuted in Rome under Nero, including Paul and Peter. He noted, further, that the names of the two martyrs were recorded in cemeteries there. The cemetery of Peter was thought to be near the obelisk on Vatican Hill, a location Eusebius based on the dialogue (disputation) against Proclus by the Roman priest Gaius, who lived when Zephyrinus was Bishop of Rome (ca. 198-217). Although

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16 Iversen, Exile, 31-32, believes the removal of this ball was symbolic of ridding the monument of its Roman past.
17 Ibid., 23.
19 Eusebius, The Church History c. 260-340, translated by Paul L. Maier (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999), II, XXV, 85-86. Eusebius writes that Nero was the first Roman emperor to truly persecute the Christians and that Bishop Dionysius of Corinth confirmed that the two apostles Paul and Peter had been martyred at the same time. Eusebius included several extracts from Gaius’ disputation against Proclus, the leader of the Montanists, including Gaius’ statement that the bodies of the martyrs could be found on the Vatican and on the Via Ostia. Gaius refers to the martyrs’ remains as “trophies” of the apostles that bore witness to their untimely deaths.
the Bible does not mention Peter’s death in Rome, Saint Peter and Saint Paul would be remembered as Roman martyrs only a century after the death of Christ. In the lore that developed around the apostle Peter, it was believed that he died with the many Christians crucified near this obelisk, making this stone obelisk the last witness to his death.

People imagined that Peter would have gazed upon the obelisk during his martyrdom. This is how the event appears in a fourteenth-century mural in the Church of San Pietro a Gardo in Tuscany (Figure 2). A similar image painted in fresco appears inside the Sancta Santorum in Rome, but rather than depicting the Vatican obelisk, the tomb of Romulus (Sepulcrum Romuli) and the tomb of Hadrian (later, the Castel Sant’Angelo) are depicted (Figure 3).

Both are major Roman buildings that, though stylized in the painting, are recognizable as the pyramidal and cylindrical structures directly behind Peter. Herbert Kessler and Johanna Zacharias identify the two soldiers with halos in the scene as Saint Processus and Saint Martianus, the Roman guards who were converted to Christianity by Peter when he was imprisoned at the Marmertine prison in Rome; the two men were later condemned to death for being Christians. The belief that both Peter and Paul had suffered martyrdom in Rome is what made the city especially sacred to pilgrims. Both the tomb of Romulus and that of Hadrian are important to the discussion of the obelisk.

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20 See 1 Clement 5: 4-7, an epistle written in Rome that is thought to date about 95-96, during the reign of the Emperor Domitian. The passage cited refers to the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul.
22 During the reign of Gregory I (590-604), Hadrian’s tomb was renamed after the archangel because of a vision experienced by Pope Gregory in which the archangel appeared on the tower.
24 Kessler, Rome 1300, 47.
25 For the story of Peter imprisoned in Rome, see the legendary Acts of Saints Processus and Martianus (ca. 8th century), in which the two men are described as jailers who converted to Christianity and were baptized by Peter. While the original site of their burial is disputed, relics of the martyrs were translated to the church of Saint Peter’s in the ninth century.
26 Kessler, Rome 1300, 46.
because, like the obelisk, they were present in the early landscape of Rome. These two monuments were close to the place of Peter’s martyrdom, as is shown in Pirro Ligorio’s map of 1561 (Figure 4) that reconstructs monuments of ancient Rome prior to the building of Saint Peter’s basilica. The northwest section of Ligorio’s map, pictured here, shows Mons Vaticanus (Vatican Hill), an area called the Vatican by late antiquity, where we find the Circus of Caligula and Nero with an obelisk in the middle of the racecourse. Nearby are the two tombs: the pyramid (Romulus) and cylindrical tumulus (Hadrian). The tomb of Emperor Hadrian (117-138) was converted into a fortress in the late third century when the Aurelian walls were built to encircle much of Rome. This fortress guarded the only bridge across the Tiber that could be used to enter Rome from the west side, the Aelian Bridge (Pons S. Pietri, or Bridge of Saint Peter’s). According to Kessler, “In 547, the Ostrogothic King Totila (511-52) . . . [built] a low rampart, creating a kind of castle with the fortified tomb at its center. From then on, whoever controlled Hadrian’s tomb controlled Rome.”

The Sepulcrum Romuli, or tomb of Romulus, is the most distinctive monument in the Vatican area (Mons Vaticanus). According to medieval legend, it was a funerary monument erected to honor the founder of Rome. It became “emblematic of the Vatican area,” due partly to its great size. The pyramidal shape of the monument was mirrored in the so-called tomb of Remus, which lay north of Saint Paul’s basilica.

27 Ibid., 184-85.
28 Ibid., 186.
30 Kessler, Rome 1300, 187. Remus was the brother of Romulus and viewed as the co-founder of Rome. The so-called pyramid of Remus, built by Cestius (died 1st century BCE), is a tomb located outside the Porta San Paolo (Porta Ostiensis). I find it interesting that the churches of Peter and Paul both had pyramids
Peter’s grave was just north of the Circus of Caligula and Nero. By the end of the second century CE, a cemetery had been created, containing mausolea and a plot with a few graves, one of which was thought to contain the apostle’s body. Over time, the circus fell into disrepair and the cemetery increased in size. An imperial mausoleum was built in the Vatican Hill area, over the spina (the median running lengthwise in the center of the circus) near where the obelisk stood and not far from the place the Christian community visited in remembrance of the martyred Apostle Peter. Because Emperor Constantine constructed a church here to honor Saint Peter, the Circus of Caligula and Nero became hallowed ground. The presence of this church would change the character and topography of the area over the coming years as “monasteries and nunneries . . . [emerged] to serve the spiritual needs of pilgrims [who flocked to] Peter’s grave.”

Richard Krautheimer stated in his book on medieval Rome that “the history of Christian Rome starts on October 28, CE 312, when Constantine wrested the city from his co-emperor Maxentius.” In 324, twelve years after Constantine defeated Maxentius, he became the ruler of the entire Roman Empire. Constantine attributed his victories to nearby, which might have reminded medieval pilgrims of Egypt, which was part of the Holy Land. According to N. Temple, the closeness of the Tomb of Romulus to Saint Peter’s and the Tomb of Remus to Saint Paul’s is not a coincidence. By placing the founders of Rome within proximity to the founders of the Roman Church, a symbolic parallel between the two is created. See N. Temple, “The Hypnerotomachia Poliphili as a Possible Model for Topographical Interpretations of Rome in the Early Sixteenth Century,” Word & Image 14, no. 1/2 (January-June 1998): 148. The association of the pagan monument with Christian history became even more important during the late Renaissance. This intertwining of the histories of Roman antiquity and the Church will be discussed further in chapter three.

32 Ibid., 59. See also Krautheimer, Rome, 20-21, for a discussion of Christian worship in Rome in the early fourth century.
33 Iversen, Exile, 23.
34 Kessler, Rome 1300, 187, writes that to the left of the Cortina was the Vatican obelisk, which was still found among the ruins of the circus. It stood in line with a round building, a chapel that had been constructed to honor Andrew, Peter’s brother.
35 Krautheimer, Rome, 3. This event was the battle that took place at the Milvian Bridge. By defeating Maxentius, Constantine gained rule over the entire western half of the Roman Empire. Before his confrontation with Maxentius, Constantine had been a pagan; however, before going into battle he had a vision in which he saw the cross of Christ, to which he later attributed the victory.
the Christian god, and he became known as a protector of Christianity. Before moving his capital from Rome to Byzantium in 330, he had Saint Peter’s constructed as a basilica church (begun in 319) and it was typically used for funerals and burials in the Vatican garden. This funerary church was different from others, however, because the tomb of the holy apostle was not placed outside the church in a catacomb, but was buried inside the church. The enshrining of Saint Peter’s relics was central to both the creation and the design of the building.

After the time of Constantine and during the Middle Ages this site became an important pilgrimage location. People traveled to see not just the church itself, but also the obelisk that Saint Peter looked upon during his crucifixion. While many ancient monuments were in disrepair, this obelisk was still standing at the Vatican on the south side of the church. In the 1300s the square in front of Saint Peter’s became known as the Cortina. Built from white marble that had been taken from the Tomb of Romulus, it was a place where pilgrims could pause to admire the church.

From the ninth to the late sixteenth century, the papacy went through many changes, geographical as well as political. The transformations began with Pope Leo III (795-816), who wished to see a Holy Roman Empire that embraced the union of Church and state. Leo III hoped to achieve this by crowning Charlemagne as Emperor in Rome. The unification of secular and spiritual authorities that Leo had hoped for, however, did not materialize, and wars to decide who should have greater power continued to be

38 Pastor, Popes, XX, 26.
39 Krautheimer, Rome, 26-27.
41 Kessler, Rome 1300, 188. The Mirabilia, (Part III), also refers to the steps being made from material taken from the tomb.
43 Dibner, Moving, 18.
waged across Europe. Partially to blame for the destruction that would occur in the fourteenth century was the relocation of the Papal Court from Rome to Avignon in 1309.\textsuperscript{44} The absence of the papacy from Rome caused famine and poverty in the city. Without a pope in residence, there were dwindling supplies of money and possibilities of work; many artisans left for new territories. Buildings were not fully guarded and people stole from ancient monuments and churches, resulting in their dilapidation.\textsuperscript{45} While it was in Avignon, the papacy also lost money because France taxed the money the papacy made.\textsuperscript{46} In addition, individual church orders criticized the popes in Avignon about the official interpretation of scripture; to address these issues, King Charles VI of France created a General Council to make important decisions about scriptural issues.\textsuperscript{47} The newly appointed Council took power away from the Church and redistributed it among the Council members. Through the General Council that he established, King Charles VI of France was thus able to control the Church. The loss of papal authority created an environment that produced various religious factions and the election of multiple popes. The removal of the papacy from Rome, viewed with contempt by several cardinals and by the Holy Roman Empire, began a schism in 1378 that would last for about forty years.

The Council of Constance, convened from 1414-1418 to end the schism, elected a new pope on the eighth of November, 1417: Cardinal Deacon Oddone Colonna, who became Pope Martin V (1417-1431). In 1420, three years after his election, Pope Martin

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{45} Pastor, \textit{Popes}, XX, 69. Often, looters would chisel off pieces of limestone from churches and sell them for money; wood from benches and church ceilings were taken as well.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 71-72.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 75-77. The General Council was comprised of clergymen and laymen that were elected by the state.
V finally returned the Holy See to Rome,\textsuperscript{48} and with the papacy back in the city, money returned to the papal coffers. During the absence of the popes, Rome had been under the rule of Queen Johanna of Naples, who backed Martin’s return to the city and helped to fund his church restoration projects.\textsuperscript{49} The support of Naples made Martin’s tasks easier to accomplish as he began an ambitious restoration of Rome by cleaning up the streets, removing trash, and clearing roads. This was not a small project because it affected pedestrian, horse, and carriage traffic in busy parts of the city. Martin began the restoration of the roads in 1425 by reinstating the \textit{maestri delle strade} (masters of the streets), or city magistrates, whose job was to improve Rome’s roads as well as the overall urban environment.\textsuperscript{50} Martin also restored many churches, including the roof and portico of Saint Peter’s. He did not focus much attention on the church itself because at this time San Giovanni in Laterno was the cathedral of Rome, and his efforts went into projects there.\textsuperscript{51} Although Martin V is considered the first of the Renaissance popes because of his interest in urban planning, it was not until the election of Nicholas V that the Holy See started to rebuild.

Tommaso Parentucello became Pope Nicholas V (1447-1455) on March 6, 1447, in the church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva. During his pontificate the population of Rome grew, and in a twelve-year span it increased from around 50,000 to almost 100,000.\textsuperscript{52} According to Carroll William Westfall, Nicholas V was a visionary pope who

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 208.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 213. It is important to understand the state of Rome prior to the Renaissance, and the steps that were taken prior to the election Pope Sixtus V.
\textsuperscript{50} Carol M. Richardson, \textit{Reclaiming Rome: Cardinals in the Fifteenth Century} (Boston: Brill, 2009), 151.
\textsuperscript{51} Pastor, \textit{Popes}, XX, 218. Pastor writes that Martin V spent more attention on San Giovanni in Laterno than on Saint Peter’s during his pontificate. Saint Peter’s would become the principal focus of interest for Pope Nicolas V.
\textsuperscript{52} Dibner, \textit{Moving}, 18.
wanted a Rome built with purpose and precision.\textsuperscript{53} This vision included making the Vatican obelisk the centerpiece of the square in front of Saint Peter’s, the church that Nicholas believed could unify the Church under his papal rule. Nicholas envisioned the Vatican and Saint Peter’s becoming “the light to guide Rome as the new Christian Capital back to its former glory.”\textsuperscript{54} Nicholas laid the groundwork for the remodeling of the Vatican and Saint Peter’s, and made his permanent residence beside the church.

Nicholas recognized the symbolic potential of the church and its connection to the antiquity and power of Rome. Because of its close association with Peter, its original function as a funerary church used for papal ceremonies, and its ties to an early Christian community in the area, the church was central to Nicholas’s larger plans for Rome.\textsuperscript{55} He had new ideas for the streets of the city, imagining an urban design that would focus on Saint Peter’s (today the streets still reflect Nicholas’s scheme).\textsuperscript{56} He considered it the perfect setting for the “new” papacy because it was the church of the Apostles, and was “Petrine and apostolic rather than imperial,” thus representing the new ideals of the Church.\textsuperscript{57} For Nicholas, Rome was to be “the seat of the papal government and administration . . . [as well as] the inviolable metropolis of Christianity and the sacred residence of its head, and this idea found expression in deliberate efforts to combine into a harmonious urban unity the basilica, the palace, and the fortress of S. Angelo.”\textsuperscript{58} This new focus deviated from that of previous centuries in which the Roman Catholic Church emphasized its imperial ties to Constantine as the first Christian Emperor. The pope’s

\begin{footnotes}
\item[54] Pastor, \textit{Popes}, XX, 55.
\item[55] Thoenes, “Renaissance St. Peter’s,” 64.
\item[56] Westfall, \textit{Urban Planning}, ix.
\item[57] Ibid., 20.
\item[58] Iversen, \textit{Exile}, 26.
\end{footnotes}
church, Saint John of the Lateran, was built by Constantine next to an existing palace that the emperor owned.\textsuperscript{59} In contrast, the palace at Saint Peter’s was a Christian residence without a history of imperial use.\textsuperscript{60} When Nicholas refocused the seat of the papacy to the Vatican, it was meant to bring the pope physically closer to the place associated with the holy man considered the first pope of Rome, Peter. Nicholas also changed the emblems of his crest, adopting the keys of Saint Peter for his new coat of arms. According to Westfall, this symbol signifies that no council of men could hold the keys to heaven, that only the pope could do this, thus creating a link between Peter and the popes of Rome.\textsuperscript{61} The keys represented the spiritual power of the popes: one key signified rational knowledge and the other, “power of authority in deciding in judgments of the soul.”\textsuperscript{62}

During the reign of Pope Leo IV (847-855), as a result of Saracen attacks, the old walls of the city had been reinforced and new walls were erected that “enclosed the entire Vatican area.”\textsuperscript{63} Among Leo’s walls, were those built between Saint Peter’s and the Castel Sant’Angelo.\textsuperscript{64} This area, known as the Borgo, was oriented on a longitudinal axis from east to west.\textsuperscript{65} Saint Peter’s could be approached only from the Aelian Bridge, and so traffic had to pass by the castle before entering the Borgo, which is pictured in the

\textsuperscript{59} Krautheimer, \textit{Profile of a City}, 21, writes that the barracks of the imperial horseguards were torn down and the church built on the site.
\textsuperscript{60} According to Westfall, \textit{Urban Planning}, 20, Saint Peter’s was a site where many Christians gathered to worship in secret during their oppression by the Romans. This was due to the proximity of the site to the place where Saint Peter had been martyred.
\textsuperscript{61} Westfall, \textit{Urban Planning}, 20.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 21. This meaning of the keys appears in \textit{Poenitentia}, fol. 18.
\textsuperscript{63} Kessler, \textit{Rome 1300}, 186. See also Richard Krautheimer, \textit{Rome, Profile of a City}, 312-1308 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), 117-118. During the Saracen attacks, the churches of Saint Peter and Paul were robbed of treasures, prompting Pope Leo IV to create walls to enclose the Vatican area. From the Castel Sant’Angelo, the new wall, called the Leonine Wall, encircled Saint Peter’s and other churches and convents in the vicinity; the wall ended at the Tiber near the place where Porta Santo Spirito would be built.
\textsuperscript{64} Thoenes, “Renaissance St. Peter’s,” 64.
\textsuperscript{65} Iversen, \textit{Exile}, 27.
topographical map of ancient Rome by Rodolfo Lanciani (Figure 5). Nicholas planned to build a new square to connect the castle with another monumental piazza, which would bring traffic to the front of the basilica and the palace. As part of his new urban scheme, Nicholas wanted to move the obelisk to the front of Saint Peter’s to mark this church, centered on the place of Peter’s martyrdom, as the heart of the new papal identity. His goal was to place the obelisk in front of the stairs that lead to the atrium and into the church so that the new façade would be seen in conjunction with the obelisk. He intended the Vatican obelisk not only to be the new cornerstone for the Borgo and the center of the new Rome, but also to mark the new center of Christianity. Antonio Tempesta’s engraving of Rome in 1593 reflects ideas that were born from this plan (Figure 6).

Nicholas V enlisted Leon Battista Alberti’s help to move the Vatican obelisk to the front of the piazza. It was the dream of Nicholas, according to his secretary Gianozzo Manetti, that the obelisk be raised above an elaborate base and topped by a bronze image of Christ placed atop the bronze orb. Nicholas envisioned the base to have four life-size figures of the evangelists cast from bronze. However, neither Nicholas V nor Leon Battista Alberti had the tools or systems to move the obelisk two-hundred seventy-five yards, the distance required for it to be erected in front of the façade. Nevertheless, the idea of moving the obelisk was considered by many popes who succeeded Nicholas. The next to attempt the movement was Pope Paul II (Pietro Barbo, ruled 1464-1471). He might have been able to achieve this, but after meeting with the architect Aristotle di Fioravanti in 1471 to discuss the logistics of the move, Paul suffered a fatal stroke and

66 Ibid.  
67 Ibid.  
68 Ibid.
died the next day.⁶⁹ About one century after the death of Paul II, Gregory XIII (Ugo Boncompagni, ruled 1572-1585) was the next pope to seriously consider moving the obelisk. Throughout his reign, Gregory XIII interviewed several architects and engineers; the most prominent was Camillo Agrippa.⁷⁰ In the end, however, Gregory XIII decided not to move the obelisk. I suggest that the task was shelved because Gregory XIII was unsure about the success of moving such a massive monument. Both Michelangelo and Sangallo expressed concerns that the obelisk might break during its relocation, and it seems reasonable to imagine that Pope Gregory XIII did not wish to take the chance that this disaster would occur during his pontificate.⁷¹ It was not until 1585, with the election of Cardinal Montalto (Felice Peretti), Pope Sixtus V, that this dream was realized.

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⁶⁹ Ibid., 27-28.
⁷⁰ Ibid., 28.
⁷¹ Ibid. Iversen proposes several reasons why Gregory XII may have abandoned the project, including that the negative responses of Sangallo and Michelangelo dissuaded him.
CHAPTER 2: ORIGIN AND MEANING

In fifteenth-century Italy, ancient Egyptian monuments were objects of great interest. Some humanist scholars who believed hieroglyphs were coded messages about the ancient culture that had used them were intent on unlocking the secrets hidden in them. While the particular focus of this study is on the Vatican obelisk, which does not have hieroglyphs inscribed on its shaft, the absence itself was significant. Fascination with Egyptian culture grew with the circulation of Hieroglyphica by Horapollo, written as a dictionary for hieroglyphs. In 1419, when the Florentine Cristoforo Buondelmonti found Horapollo’s book on the Greek isle of Andros, the text was thought to be ancient. Scholars at the time believed that Horapollo was an Egyptian from Nilopolis, who wrote in Coptic but whose manuscript was a Greek translation by Philippus. The manuscript was studied and later copied with the addition of hieroglyphic images created by contemporary artists, including Albrecht Dürer. Horapollo’s work was first published in Venice in 1505 by Aldus.

As international printing houses were established in Italy and books became cheaper and more readily available, a broad range of material was disseminated. Some books popular at the time focused on the culture and language of the ancient Romans and

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74 Ibid., 47. According to Iversen, the Greek in the Hieroglyphica is poor. No one really knows who actually wrote this book or exactly when it was written.
75 Ibid., 65. Ten years later, a second version was printed, this time in Latin.
Egyptians. Francesco Colonna’s *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, published in Venice in 1499, contains several pages of hieroglyphs scattered throughout the book, reflecting a growing subculture of those interested in ancient Egypt (Figure 7). In Colonna’s book the main character, Poliphilio, stumbles across many Egyptian hieroglyphs and obelisks during his journey to find his love. One woodcut image specifically refers to the Obelisk of Caesar, or the Vatican obelisk (Figure 8), and in another image linked to this one are hieroglyphs with an inscription dedicated to Julius Caesar (Figure 9). The inclusion of this obelisk and the inscription shows the importance this monument had in Italy at the time. In 1499, when Colonna published this book, he included images of the Vatican obelisk and others to honor the city of Rome and the antique monuments it contained. The fact that the actual Vatican obelisk lacked hieroglyphs is noteworthy, but not a mystery to the many Romans and pilgrims who thought the obelisk was made for a Roman emperor rather than a pharaoh.

In discussing the importance of the Vatican obelisk, we should not forget the earlier history of the monument. I agree with Erik Iversen and Herbert Kessler, who contend that any attempt to discuss obelisks must include their historic origins. Each was originally created with Egyptian cultic significance, which must be taken into account. These great obelisks were made by a civilization who conquered the land they lived on, used its resources to create a lavish culture, and became extraordinary builders. Despite the importance of the Great Pyramids of Giza, obelisks are often overlooked; yet, they are

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77 Curran, “Renaissance Egyptology,” 172. According to Brian Curran, the obelisk found in the image (Figure 19 in his text and Figure 8 in this text) represents the Capitoline obelisk due to its placement next to a palm tree in the woodcut. I posit that it depicts the Vatican obelisk because, although the surroundings look similar to the placement of the Capitoline obelisk next to Santa Maria in Aracoeli, the obelisk itself has an orb atop its pyramidion and is accompanied by an un-inscribed shaft, like that of the Vatican obelisk.

colossal monolithic stones that were of great significance. Those imported to Rome were valued and erected to glorify the eternal city and its power.

In form an obelisk is a single, four-sided piece of stone that stands upright and gradually tapers as it rises from the ground. It terminates in a small pyramid at the top, called a “pyramidion.” Anthony Grafton has pointed out that, “their tapering square shafts . . . proved the Egyptians masters of nature.” Part of what makes these Egyptian works so impressive is that they are carved as a single piece of rock, a type of red granite found in Egypt, that possesses qualities that helped preserve it for centuries. The red granite, unlike most stone, does not contain foreign substances that could weaken it. Most of the ancient obelisks that exist today were quarried from the same area, Aswan (Figure 10). The first obelisk was quarried around the 3rd millennium BCE. The creation of obelisks gradually replaced the building of pyramids because they were easier to create and reached greater heights.

The origin of the Egyptian word for obelisk, which is Tekhen(u), is unknown. The Greeks called them obeliskos (the source of the English word obelisk), which means “small spit,” a word the Greeks chose because of the tall and narrow shape of the monumental stones. In Egypt, obelisks were used in pairs, and often placed in open

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81 Not all obelisks were made of red granite, but all of the colossal obelisks were quarried in Aswan. Small obelisks used for private tombs became popular during the 5th and 6th dynasties; these were made of sandstone. Erik Iversen, “Obelisk: Ancient Egypt” *The Grove Dictionary of Art*, vol. I, ed. Jane Turner (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 329.
82 The height was important because the higher the obelisk rose, the closer it was to the sun and to its god Ra.
83 Sometimes spelled tekhen, without the “u”, the word may derive from the verb “to pierce.”
84 Habachi, *Skyscrapers*, 3.
courts and doorways to tomb chapels. Typically, they honored the sun god Ra (also called Re), as well as the pharaoh who had the obelisk created. Sources from the Sixth Dynasty suggest that obelisks were meant to represent the next stage in monumental expression and were made by the Royal Solar Cult. The imagery and inscriptions on the stone inform us about the link between the pharaohs and the sun god Ra: they were dedicated to Ra in the hope of uniting the kingdom of Ra with the kingdom of the pharaoh on earth. The expectation was that once erected, a stone would unite these two omnipotent beings for eternity. We find sun cults at Heliopolis and Thebes; in these centers, the peak, or pyramidion, of an obelisk was topped with metal, usually gold and silver, which would shine brightly when hit by the rays of the sun. Pliny believed the obelisks to represent the petrified rays of the sun.89

The pyramidion itself has a rich history and symbolism. Its first appearance is noted in Heliopolis before the reign of the first pharaoh and the First Dynasty (ca. 3100 to 2890 BCE). These stones, which were called *ben*, or *benben* stones, were believed to date back to the beginning of time. They were fetishes for Atum, the setting sun, and Ra (also known as Re, Re-Harakhiti), the rising sun. The sun was an important aspect of Egyptian culture and faith because it represented the life source for plants and humanity. The sun was seen as an element that could resurrect itself each day in order to sustain the life of the Egyptian peoples. The Egyptians believed that when people died, they traveled

86 Ibid.
87 Ibid., 140.
88 Ibid., 137.
89 Pliny, *Natural History*, XXXVI. XIV.
90 Habachi, *Skyscrapers*, 5.
91 Ibid.
to the afterlife, which contained all the riches they had possessed during life. A soul reached the afterlife by following the god of the setting sun to the underworld.92

The original benben stone was said to arise as the first landform after the recession of the primeval waters.93 Its appearance marked the place where “the sun’s rays touched the earth for the first time.”94 Benben stones are associated also with the benu bird, or phoenix.95 The phoenix in mythology possesses the greatest of powers, because it can resurrect itself after its death. It is, therefore, symbolic of a cycle in nature that includes birth, death, and rebirth. “The benben presumably had a pyramidal or stunted obelisk-like shape. Its relation to both forms is strongly suggested by the Egyptian name for the obelisk’s pyramidion, which they called the benbenet.”96 In earlier times, certain benben stones were thought to embody Ra or Atum on earth. According to Labib Habachi, “Obelisks were always regarded by the ancient Egyptians as a symbol of the sun god related to the Benben, but during certain periods they were looked upon as being themselves occupied by a god and thus entitled to offerings.”97 Thus, the pyramidion, or benbenet, on an obelisk had a long tradition dating to the beginning of Egyptian time and had deep meaning for Egyptians because it represented the unification of earth with the sun god.98 The obelisk represented the unity of the pharaoh and the sun god.99

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92 Ibid., 8-11.
95 Ibid. See also Habachi, Skyscrapers, 5.
96 Curran, Obelisk: A History, 14-15. By placing a golden benbenet atop a tapering, four-sided shaft, the creators of the obelisk had combined the Egyptian symbols of earthly creation with the creator of life, the sun.
97 Habachi, Skyscrapers, 10.
98 Ibid., 3-6.
Egyptians considered the sun to be the progenitor of life, which explains why Ra became the most important god in Egyptian lore. He answered the question, “Where did we come from?” He was thought to have begun time, and was called both Ra and Atum. Atum means “the all,” but as the sun and source of life on Earth he became more specifically called “the sun” or Ra. Ra is said to have seventy-four different forms or shapes. Some of these forms were manifested in other Egyptian gods, such as Horus and Isis. The city of the sun, later called Heliopolis by the Greeks, was built to honor the great creator, Ra. The Egyptians called the city Iunu, meaning “the pillar,” and also Iunu Meht, or “the northern pillar.” It was here that the first obelisks were erected, possibly as early as the Fifth Dynasty (ca. 2494-2345 BCE). Sadly, there is only one monolithic pillar that still stands in Heliopolis today, erected by Sesostris I (ca. 1971-1928 BC). Thebes, or modern Luxor, was another important city that contained obelisks. This city, called Iunu Shemajit, “the southern pillar,” or “Heliopolis of the south,” honored a solar god named Amun, who was later assimilated into Amun-Ra. Amun-Ra became the “king of the gods” after the assimilation and new obelisks were erected.

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100 It is also believed that Ra created the entire universe. See Quirke, *Cult of Ra*, 23, and Habachi, *Skyscrapers of the Past*, 6.
101 Quirke, *Cult of Ra*, 23-25. 102 Ibid., 25.
103 Ibid., 30.
104 Ibid., 31.
105 Habachi, *Skyscrapers*, 5.
106 Ibid.
107 Ibid. Curran, *Obelisk: A History*, 18, refers to another example of assimilation occurring in the Fourth Dynasty when Ra was combined with the god Atum and became known at Atum-Re. The longevity of the Egyptian pantheon surpassed many religions of the time because of its ability to change.
108 Curran, *Obelisk: A History*, 18. In *Skyscrapers of the Past*, 6, Habachi writes that Amun was the main god of Thebes (modern day Luxor) and was represented as a human with a crown of tall feathers. The assimilation took place when the capital of Egypt was moved to Thebes, and the religion needed to combine traits of different gods.
raised on his behalf. Obelisks were often raised as lavish gifts to the gods they represented, and the higher they stood the closer to heaven and the gods the pharaoh who raised them would become. The Egyptian kings who raised obelisks usually justified the effort by proclaiming they were beloved by several solar gods, and shared a close relationship with these deities. Often they were raised to commemorate an important accomplishment, or during an Egyptian jubilee year, which is similar to the reasons that Pope Sixtus V had for erecting obelisks.

Obelisks were placed in pairs at the opening of temple precincts and were used as measuring tools for subsequent construction, with the height of the other structures determined by that of the obelisks. In pairs, these monoliths created a gateway into the realm of the gods, and were placed very carefully, always keeping the sun’s rising and falling in mind. The fact that an obelisk was cut as a single piece of stone was a reminder of the pharaoh’s power on earth: only someone with immense power could have such a marvel erected. Therefore, the obelisk was dedicated not only to gods but also to the pharaoh who erected it, further linking heaven and earth.

Red granite from Aswan was the ideal material for obelisks because of its color—red is symbolic of the rays of the sun—and its smooth reflective sheen when

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111 Habachi, *Skyscrapers*, 11-12. Obelisks typically appeared in pairs because one represented the rising sun while the other the setting sun. However, “small obeliskoid objects were sometimes placed in front of tombs.” They were different from the grand obelisk pillars in that they were only engraved with hieroglyphs on one side, the east side, as opposed to all four. This was so that the sun god who served the underworld could guide them to the underworld.
113 Ibid., 17.
114 This dedication was carved into the side of the monument.
polished.115 According to Pliny, red granite was known by the name “pyrrhopoeilos,” which means “molten red.”116 The process the Egyptians used for quarrying the stone remained largely a mystery until extensive studies and tests were made in 1921 and 1922 on an unfinished obelisk.117 This research was done by the English archeologist Reginald Engelbach (1888–1946), who demonstrated that the Aswan obelisk was left in the quarry because it had a fissure in the rock (Figure 11).118 The rock or obelisk is detached on all sides except for the bottom one, which is still connected to the rock bed. Had this rock been extracted it would stand 137 feet high, have a base about 14 feet wide, and weigh around 1,168 tons.119 If erected it would be the tallest known obelisk.

Unfortunately, no records survive to fully explain how obelisks were quarried, moved, or erected. Some reference to the process can be found in a few papyrus scrolls, which mention sand and embankments but nothing in detail.120 There is still much speculation about the methods used to carve the obelisk in one piece. Most researchers consider the process to have been lengthy and tedious,121 which may explain why the Romans exported existing obelisks from Egypt. As to the extraction process, it has been speculated that the shape was “procured by cutting a line with a chisel two inches thick all around the stone that was to be removed, and then a machine would have been used to separate the rock the rest of the way.”122 More recently, however, alternate theories have

115 Habachi, Skyscrapers, 15.
116 Pliny, Natural History, XXXVI.XIV.
117 Curran, Obelisk, A History, 24. Prior to the studies carried out on the unfinished obelisk at Aswan, the only clues regarding the process for quarrying the stone came from paintings and the speculations made by Pliny.
118 Habachi, Skyscrapers, 16.
119 Ibid., 17.
120 Ibid., 34.
been advanced as to how the rock was extracted. In Habachi’s book, *The Obelisks of Egypt: Skyscrapers of the Past*, the author proposes that the rock was first tested with shafts to determine whether it was strong enough to endure the extraction process. Once the rock was deemed worthy, work began. To ensure the monolith would be straight, men holding a rope covered in ochre stood in a line down the center of the stone to be extracted; when an even line had been sited with a square level, the rope would be snapped against the rock.\(^\text{123}\) This left a straight line of ochre on the rock that guided the workers in the creation of the obelisk.\(^\text{124}\) To begin the extraction, the surface of the rock was evened out. This was done by “placing bricks upon the surface, heating them until they were quite hot, and then dousing them with cold water.”\(^\text{125}\) This would cause the rock to crumble. The method would be repeated on smaller and smaller areas of raised stone until a smooth surface was attained. Next came the detachment of the sides. “Large balls of dolerite, each weighing about 5.5 kilograms and measuring 15 to 30 centimeters,” were used (Figure 12).\(^\text{126}\) The balls were affixed to rammers as weights that struck down vertically to detach the rock.\(^\text{127}\) Researchers believe no chisels or picks were used because, unlike the dolerite balls that remain, none have been discovered near the obelisk.\(^\text{128}\) Also, chisels leave marks that can be easily recognized by archeologists, “but here we have the effect of a series of parallel, vertical ‘cuts’ just as if the rock had been

\(^{124}\) Ibid., 26-27. To create the correct proportioned slope of the obelisk, the Egyptians used a *seqed*, or length of the horizontal line: the vertical was a cubit (a cubit is about 17 to 22 inches). The Egyptians used the cubits and *seqeds* in order to evenly slope the obelisk. The base of an obelisk is larger than the top, with the pyramidion being in line with the base corners.
\(^{125}\) Habachi, *Skyscrapers*, 17.
\(^{126}\) Ibid.
\(^{127}\) Ibid.
\(^{128}\) The Egyptians had copper tools, but they would have broken before cracking the surface of the granite.
extracted with a gigantic cheese-scoop." Another popular theory is that wood wedges might have been used, perhaps inserted into grooves and then wetted, expanding the wood and cleaving the rock. After the obelisk shape was extracted, trenches were cut or scooped out around the obelisk to assist in the removal from the quarry.

It is hypothesized that the procuring of an obelisk would have taken about seven months to complete. After they were cut to an exact form, they were then polished to a smooth surface by pounding and grinding with diorite balls. It is speculated that it was this finishing touch that helped to conserve the sculpture by hardening the surface, preventing the retention or absorption of moisture. Inscriptions, usually mentioning Ra and the pharaoh who had commissioned the giant monolith, would then be added.

According to the British Egyptologist W. M. Flinder Petrie, the inscriptions were engraved with emery, since no bronze tools were available at the time and the iron tools were too primitive to do the job. The inscriptions were done while the rock was still inside the quarry but after it had been removed from the rock bed and placed on a sled. “This sled remained in position until the obelisk had been erected on its pedestal; therefore, only three sides would have been available for decoration in the quarry.” This made it necessary to decorate the final side only after it was erected on its pedestal.

After the removal of the obelisk from the quarry came the difficult task of moving the gigantic, heavy stone to the place where it would be raised. Most of what we imagine

129 Habachi, Skyscrapers, 17.
130 Exactly how wedges may have been used, however, is not yet known.
131 Ibid., 20.
132 Ibid., 32.
133 Gorringe, Egyptian Obelisks, 149.
134 Habachi, Skyscrapers, 32.
135 Ibid.
about this particular part of the process is based on speculation and on a wall painting
called the “Colossus of Sledge,” found in a tomb near El Bersheh and dated to the time of
Usortesen II in the Twelfth Dynasty.136 The painting depicts a shaft or transport that has
been put down on a sledge with ropes of palm reeds used to draw the stone into the
inundation level of the soil, where it was left until the Nile flooded.137 Once this occurred,
the stone was moved onto a raft. Workers may have stood in the water and lifted the
monolith onto a sunken raft, which would take the obelisk to its destination.138 In Ebers’
book, Caire a Philae, it is suggested that the sledges for moving the obelisks were pulled
by criminals, who may have been used for this task because the job was dangerous and
too risky for the masons of a pharaoh.139 Habachi has proposed another removal method,
suggesting that the obelisk might have been dragged down from the quarry on wood
pillions to an embankment that was built up around the barge or raft.140 After the obelisk
was aboard the barge, the soil or sand that held the barge was removed, and the obelisk
then began its journey down the Nile. This “movement was done during the annual
flooding of the Nile.”141 This idea is based on a wall painting in Hatshepsut’s funerary
temple at Deir-el Bahari (Figure 13) depicting “obelisks shown end-to-end on the barge,
which was towed by three rows of boats, nine in each row with a tenth in the lead for the

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136 Gorringe, *Egyptian Obelisks*, 152.
137 Ibid.
138 According to a document from Ramesses IV’s reign, the pharaoh needed approximately 8,400 men to
move the obelisk, including: 1 director (or manager), 9 officers of the pharaoh, 36 military workers, 10
artists, 130 carving masons, 2,000 common workers, 5,000 slaves, and 800 “men from Ayan.” This last
term is used by Engelbach and I believe it refers to prisoners, based on Eber’s hypothesis that criminals
worked on these types of building projects. (This information is found in Curran, *Obelisk: A History*, 30.).
140 Habachi, *Skyscrapers*, 24, 27. This hypothesis seems to be the more likely of the two. Egyptians took
advantage of the flooding of the Nile to aid the moving process.
141 Ibid., 27.
pilots.”

Other boats would follow to perform religious rites honoring the movement of the giant rock.

Once the barge reached its destination, another ramp of earth extended from the spot where the obelisk was to be erected. It is speculated that once off the barge, the obelisk would be attached once again to a sledge and pulled up the ramp to its permanent location. There are many different ideas as to how the obelisk was erected once it reached its destination. I find two methods the most probable. The first was put forward by Reginald Engelbach in the 1920s. He believed that the obelisk could be moved by a sled to a funnel-shaped pit filled with sand, removed from the sled, and then lowered into the pit by removing the sand from the pit. As the sand slowly left the pit, workmen could adjust the obelisk and ropes that were tied to the top of the obelisk could be used to pull the obelisk upright, as seen in the didactic image in his book, The Problem of the Obelisks (Figure 14). The second proposal was made by Ludwig Borchardt (published in 1905), who suggested that the grooves found in old obelisk pedestals were meant to secure ropes and indicate that the Egyptians moved the obelisk horizontally onto a raised area in front of the obelisk pedestal. The obelisk was then lifted upright with ropes and a pulley system onto the top of its pedestal. Often the pharaoh who commissioned the

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142 Ibid.
143 Curran, Obelisk a History, 30.
144 Ibid.
145 Gorringe, Egyptian Obelisks, 152.
146 Reginald Engelbach, The Problem of the Obelisks from a Study of the Unfinished Obelisk at Aswan (New York: George H. Doran, 1923), 70.
147 Ibid., see figures 27, 31, 32, and 33.
148 See Dieter Arnold, Building in Egypt: Pharonic Stone Masonry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 69-70, who discusses Borchard’s method. I believe Engelbach’s proposal to be most likely because the simpler solution, in most cases, was likely the reality.
monument would attend the elevation, and it is thought that many Egyptians might have gathered to celebrate this marvelous engineering feat.\textsuperscript{149}

The Ptolemies marked the end of Egyptian kingship. The last Ptolemy to reign was Cleopatra VII. In 30 BCE, Octavian (later, Emperor Augustus) and the Roman army conquered the Egyptians. It was then that Augustus claimed Egypt for the Roman Empire and began the transportation of their monuments to Rome.\textsuperscript{150} Augustus placed Cornelius Gallus in control of the newly claimed Egyptian territory.\textsuperscript{151} One of the first projects assigned to Gallus was the construction of a forum for Augustus in Alexandria, known as the Julium Forum.\textsuperscript{152}

Much information about how the obelisks were moved and transported to Rome is still uncertain. Yet we do know that the monuments were transported by specially built obelisk-ships. Three Roman ships connected by strong timbers were used: one in front and two parallel ships followed. The front ship was used to pull and guide the two aft ships and to streamline the water around them. One hundred oarsmen advanced the front ship.\textsuperscript{153} Working in three shifts throughout the day, a total of three hundred oarsmen were needed to move this massive boat. To lighten the weight of the boat, off-duty rowers were most likely transported to other, faster ships that followed the three main vessels.\textsuperscript{154}

\textsuperscript{149} Habachi, \textit{Skyscrapers}, 34.
\textsuperscript{150} “For the Egyptians the obelisk symbolized the continuity of the Pharoanian authority beyond the end of the Ptolemean dynasty and the rising of the Roman Augustus to the succeeding Egyptian Pharaoh.” (Armin Wirsching, “Supplementary Remarks on the Roman Obelisk-Ships,” \textit{The International Journal of Nautical Archeology} 32, no.1 [2003]: 123.)
\textsuperscript{151} Iversen, “So-called Inscripton of Caligula,” 149. Curran, \textit{Obelisk: A History}, 35. Gallus was a Roman poet and general and the first imperial prefect of Egypt.
\textsuperscript{152} The Julium Forum is discussed in chapter one.
\textsuperscript{153} In his article about obelisk-ships, Armin Wirsching states that, typically, about 170 oarsmen were used at one time to advance such a large ship; however, due to the large timbers connecting this front ship to the rear ones the number of oarsmen had to be cut significantly.
\textsuperscript{154} Wirsching, “Roman Obelisk Ships,” 121.
The aft ships carried the obelisk, which was placed between them across their hulls. The movement of the sea made transportation very tricky and weight distribution had to be constantly checked.

According to Suetonius, the obelisco vaticanus (the Vatican obelisk) was shipped to Rome after 37 CE. Whether the obelisk base and shaft were transported together is not known. Pliny mentions that the base and shaft of the obelisco vaticanus were moved by the same ship, but does not state if they were moved at the same time. However, the obelisk base alone weighed one hundred and fifty-five tons and the shaft, three hundred thirty tons; both of these stones moved together probably would have weighed too much for two ships. The obelisco vaticanus was brought into the port of Ostia and then on to Rome along the Tiber River. Afterward, the ship was retired and sunk in the harbor to create a mole (a barrier protecting the land from the waves) on the left side. Once the obelisk was ashore, it was taken to its intended site which would become the Circus of Caligula and Nero. In addition to their immensity and striking appearance, the many mysteries that surround the construction and symbolism of the obelisks contribute to the aura that continues to fascinate people today. Egypt was a great and mighty nation conquered by an even stronger state. Augustus, along with Diocletian and Maxentius, displayed the power of Rome by several means, which included the re-erection of obelisks at specific sites in the city. For Augustus, the obelisks represented the triumph

155 Ibid., 122.
156 Ibid.
157 An ancient port in Rome, located today near the Fiumicino Airport.
158 Both Wirshing and Iversen mention this. It is found originally in Pliny, Natural History, XVI, LXXVI. According to Iversen, the remains were rediscovered in 1960. For more information, see Iversen, Obelisks in Exile, 21.
159 Krautheimer, Rome: Profile of a City, 7.
of Rome and the pagan religion. Centuries later, Pope Sixtus V would appropriate the obelisks for his newly reformed Christian Rome.
CHAPTER 3: THE VATICAN OBELISK AND SIXTUS V

Christendom was split and the Holy See weakened by the Reformation in the sixteenth century. Intent on rebuilding the strength of the church, Sixtus V, whose papal tenure lasted for five years (1585 to 1590), became an exemplary post-Tridentine pope as he reversed the decline of the Roman Catholic Church and set about repairing and restructuring the city of Rome. To this end, the Franciscan pope commissioned several building projects. These included the construction of five bridges and five fountains as well as the erection of four obelisks, all of which appear in Giovanni Pinadello’s engraving of 1589 (Figure 15). This engraving depicts Sixtus V and illustrates the many building projects that he undertook during his time as pope. The small scenes that border Sixtus depict ways in which he changed the urban landscape of Rome; in particular, he added streets and created new, more direct pathways to pilgrimage churches throughout the city. Along these new pilgrimage roads, monuments like the obelisk were added to make it easier for pilgrims to find their way through the city on their journey to witness holy shrines. Seven of the images surrounding Sixtus contain obelisks; I believe he is shown with these obelisks not only because moving the Vatican obelisk to its new position in front of Saint Peter’s, and raising the other monoliths from where they had fallen, was very important to him, but also because he wished to associate himself with Rome’s pilgrimage churches.

After the Council of Trent, art continued to be instrumental in propagating the power and message of the Church. This council intended to reform the Church, and

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160 See Kessler, Rome 1300, 9-17, for a discussion of the papal precinct at San Giovanni in Laterano, and the role Pope Boniface took in preparing for the first Jubilee year in Rome.
decided that ecclesiastical art needed to become more direct and compelling while telling a story with imagery that was accurate and would stimulate piety.\textsuperscript{161} Based on his selection of particular Egyptian monuments and his specific placement of these at new sites, it is clear that Sixtus saw the re-erection of these pagan stones as symbolic of the triumph of the early Christians over imperial Rome. They became visual reminders to contemporary Romans of the power that the Catholic Church wielded and of its continuing strength in Rome and across Europe during the Counter-Reformation. The Vatican obelisk became Saint Peter’s obelisk because it reminded the faithful of Peter’s crucifixion. Placed in front of the basilica, it was meant to prepare the faithful for their beseeching prayers to Christ and to Peter inside the church. Because this Egyptian stone had been present during the martyrdom of Peter, it was valued as a relic with a direct connection to the saint and his death.\textsuperscript{163} Visually, the Vatican obelisk in its colossal majesty satisfied the demands of Counter-Reformation theologian Cardinal Gabriele Paleotti, who wrote in 1582 that art should “incite devotion and sting the heart.”\textsuperscript{164}

The number of projects Sixtus V initiated in his five-year term reveals the extent of his ambition to change the urban profile of Rome. For Sixtus, the pagan monuments of the past were of particular symbolic value when they were used in a Christian context.\textsuperscript{165} The new Rome he planned specifically involved the relocating of obelisks throughout the


\textsuperscript{163} The Latin Church long realized the practical value of the pagan monuments which could be reused for Christian purposes and, especially during the Counter-Reformation, could be used for their symbolic value as well.

\textsuperscript{164} Klein and Zerner, Italian Art, 1500-1600, 125.

\textsuperscript{165} Iversen, \textit{Exile}, 41. One example of the reuse of antique monuments occurred with the removal of pagan statues from the top of imperial Roman monuments (such as the giant columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius) and their replacement by figures of Christian saints.
city to underscore the triumph of the Church. Together, these Egyptian landmarks worked together to bind the landscape of Rome with the monuments of other times and religions into a cohesive Christian whole. This was a feat that took years to accomplish, and deserves additional study. Like the Church, the obelisk had conquered time and outlived fallen civilizations. Because of this, the appropriation of the obelisk reinforced the idea that the Roman Catholic Church would be everlasting.

Among Sixtus’ goals for the redesign of Rome was to make it a cleaner and safer city and to make the pilgrimage churches easier to find. This involved the creation of straight roads to link the venerated churches and the erection of tall obelisks to mark the location of devotional sites. Many scholars who discuss the history and movement of the Vatican obelisk to Saint Peter’s square limit their attention solely to this obelisk and do not give attention to the urban significance of Sixtus V’s overall plan. The logic of his plan would influence his successors, who continued to expand upon his many initiatives and brought his overall plan to completion.

166 Ibid. Iversen argues that Sixtus did not care that the Vatican obelisk was a monument for Rome or Egypt, but he cared only that it had value as a relic: the obelisk had witnessed apostles’ deaths and survived as a testament to their unwavering faith.
167 Individual works of art are too often studied in isolation. Kessler, Rome 1300, 4, discusses this issue. Writing in the Jubilee year of 2000, he observes that individual pieces of art in Rome were not created in isolation, but that “the paintings, sculptures, metalwork, icons, saints’ relics, and classical remains, as well as the sacred buildings that . . . house them, worked together in the city’s religious life.”
168 Pastor, Popes, XXII, 262, writes that the obelisk was “a silent witness of the most important events in the history of the world. . . . [and had seen] the destruction of religious unity in the West, the foul savagery of the Sack of Rome, and lastly the Saints of the reform and Catholic restoration. That great period of renewed and reinvigorated Catholic consciousness . . . set its seal on the obelisk itself . . . [making] it into a symbol of the Church which outlives all the changes of time.”
169 According to Richard Krautheimer, The Rome of Alexander VII, 63-64, Alexander VII and his papal architect, Gian Lorenzo Bernini, brought greater focus to Saint Peter’s by creating a colonnade in the piazza and an avenue leading to the church. Before this, the two borghi (main roads) near Saint Peter’s, called the old Borgo and the new, had blocks of houses between them (called the spina), separating the old Borgo from the new Borgo. Sixtus V had planned to replace the spina and two borghi’s with an avenue, but he was unable to accomplish this prior to his death.
During the Middle Ages, other than Jerusalem, there was no place as important to the beginning of Christianity as Rome. Saint Peter’s was an integral piece of the historical landscape in Rome and popes were leaders in the manner of the emperors of old Rome. I surmise that Sixtus V equated his papal reign as being similar to the Pax Romana under Augustus. He brought about major change in the landscape of the city, which caused the city itself to grow. Similar to Emperor Augustus, Sixtus wanted to renew the city of Rome, but whereas Augustus focused on building circuses, aqueducts, and pagan temples, Sixtus focused on building bridges and new roads through Rome and on the erection of four obelisks to mark the major pilgrimage churches. Having clearly marked pilgrimage roads throughout the city was important because when Christians traveled to Rome, especially during Holy Years, they worshipped at particular pilgrimage shrines; yet, the pathways twisting through the city from one holy site to another, as can be seen in Antonio Lafrei’s engraving (Figure 16), slowed movement and limited the number of sites that could be seen during a visit to the city. Pope Sixtus intended to have easier-to-follow roads leading to Rome’s churches, but especially to each of the seven pilgrimage churches (San Pietro, Santa Maria Maggiore, San Giovanni in Laterano, San Paolo fuori le Mura, San Lorenzo fuori le Mura, San Sebastiano, and Santa Croce in Gerusalemme). In his grand vision, Sixtus wanted to link all seven major churches with a

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170 Kessler, *Rome 1300*, 2. Besides Peter, other Christians were executed in Rome under the orders of Roman Emperors. Concerning the importance of Rome as a pilgrimage city, Kessler notes that the Aurelian wall mirrors the walls of the city of Jerusalem (10).
171 Ibid., 10. Kessler discusses that after the fall of the Roman Empire, popes became the source of power in Rome, as they possessed many of the responsibilities that past emperors of Rome held.
172 According to Kessler, *Rome 1300*, 1-3, pilgrims visited holy sites in Europe to cleanse themselves of sin. Starting in 1300, the Jubilee year was celebrated in Rome, which meant all the pilgrims who traveled to Rome would be forgiven of their venial sins. Jubilee year was a Jewish tradition based on the idea that “the earth, like humankind following God’s example, had an imperative need for regular bodily rest and spiritual cleansing.” The Jubilee year was adopted by Christians and celebrated every 50 years. Later, this shortened to every 25 years, a practice that continues today.
single symbol, the obelisk. Sixtus was able to accomplish the connection of only three of these seven pilgrimage churches and he chose to include the Piazza del Popolo most likely because it was the main entrance into the city.\textsuperscript{173}

The origins of urban planning in Rome can be traced to Pope Nicholas V (1447-1455), who believed that the overall aesthetic of ancient Rome could enhance the infrastructure of the city. However, Nicholas V’s ideas were only a small beginning to the grand scheme orchestrated by Pope Sixtus V. The great Egyptian monoliths already inside the walls of Rome would be for Sixtus V the focal points for creating a logical matrix of connected squares and churches. Less than four months after Sixtus V became pope, he formed a committee devoted to the task of moving the Vatican obelisk. Four cardinals were appointed as overseers of this commission.\textsuperscript{174}

Competition proposals for moving the Vatican obelisk were submitted not only from across Italy but across Europe as well. Among those who entered the contest were Giacomo del Duca, Giacomo della Porta, Bartolomeo Ammanati, Giovanni and Domenico Fontana, Camillo Agrippa, Francesco Masini, Antonio Sangallo and Oratio Marii.\textsuperscript{175} Domenico Fontana’s design was chosen by the committee as the best plan to move the obelisk.\textsuperscript{176} Before his selection, Fontana had presented his design to the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[173] Sixtus V began with the Vatican obelisk, followed by the obelisks set up at San Giovanni in Laterano and at Santa Maria Maggiore.
\item[174] Iversen, \textit{Exile}, 29.
\item[175] Ibid., n. 4, refers to Camillo Agrippa’s plan as the one preferred by the Venetian ambassador, according to Vincenzo Scamozzi’s account in \textit{Dell’Idea della Architettura Universale} (Venezia, 1615), II, 336, 35. See also Dibner, \textit{Moving the Obelisks}, 21.
\item[176] While the selection of Fontana was claimed to have been a unanimous decision by the committee, Iversen, Dibner, and other historians question whether the decision was truly unanimous because Sixtus V favored Fontana and would have wanted him to be selected. Fontana had worked on several building projects for Sixtus V prior to the pope’s election. It seems to me, however, that based on the designs included in Fontana’s book, his design was the best. Although Agrippa might have initiated thoughts as to how to move the monolith, his design would not have worked, nor would many of the other designs. Of course, in his book Fontana might have altered the designs of his competitors’ submissions.
\end{footnotes}
committee with a demonstration of how it would work: he planned to move the obelisk with two towers and a pulley system. The obelisk would be lifted up and moved into a horizontal position using ropes and pulleys, and then it would be slowly lowered down onto a sledge and placed on a ramp that led to its new site. The obelisk raising would use the same method as its lowering, but in reverse.

Several years after his selection and the transfer of the Vatican obelisk, Domenico Fontana recorded the movement of the obelisk in his book, *Della trasportatione dell’obelisco vaticano*, written in 1590. On the second page of the book Fontana included an engraving of himself under the papal hat and the pontifical seal of Sixtus V (Figure 17). In the image he is holding what appears to be the Vatican obelisk.\(^{177}\) Below his elbow are the architectural measuring tools he would have used to plan the movement of the obelisk. The obelisk he holds is not the only one pictured in this engraving, but there are two more placed inside shields on the lower right side and the lower left. The inscription states that the entire world reveled at the greatness of Sixtus V and his ability to transport the Vatican obelisk. Fontana also included an engraving that depicts some of the other designs submitted to the obelisk committee, which can be found on the page following the end of his first chapter. He numbered each of the projects, but placed his own design upon winged cherubs (Figure 18).\(^{178}\) The engraving depicts the back of the sacristy of Saint Peter’s and shows the obelisk where it stood before it was moved. In the upper right hand corner is a woman, holding a bundle of wood and an olive branch who

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\(^{177}\) I conclude the obelisk pictured is the Vatican obelisk because all the other obelisks that Domenico Fontana erected, except the one by Santa Maria Maggiore, have hieroglyphs engraved upon their surfaces, while the obelisk pictured does not.

may represent a virtue, such as Concord. In another engraving in Fontana’s book, a woman again holds a bundle of wood (Figure 19). Below her is the Latin name *Concordia*, or Concord, a minor virtue that can represent religious, civic, or political virtue and is often shown with a shield bearing an image of an olive branch or a bundle of wood. Concord signifies the strength that comes from unity. The symbol seems fitting in the efforts of Pope Sixtus V to reunite the Reformed Catholic Church, and his use of the obelisk to signify the continued strength and triumph of the Church.

Domenico Fontana was an engineer and an architect, who was born in 1543 at Melide in the Canton Ticino of Switzerland. His father, Matteo Fontana, was also an architect and worked in Venice for much of his career. Domenico had two brothers, Giovanni and Marsiglio, and all three sometimes worked together. Before Sixtus became pope, Fontana worked for him on a building project in Rome.

After Fontana’s plan had been chosen, preparations began to move the obelisk, which at that time was next to Saint Peter’s near the south sacristy, as it appears in Pirro Ligorio’s engraving (Figure 20). One of Fontana’s major concerns was the strength of the ground in front of the church. It was determined that the ground in the piazza was too swampy to hold the weight of the obelisk and had to be solidified. A forty-three feet

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179 James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 73. Later, the wood was replaced by arrows.
181 Ibid. According to Dibner, Fontana worked for Cardinal Felice Peretti de Montaldo (later Sixtus V) in Rome, where he “was the designer and constructor of the mausoleum of Pope Nicholas IV in 1574, and of several palace buildings. He was then building a small chapel of the Sacrament erected in Santa Maria Maggiore.” Dibner writes that this commission greatly displeased Pope Gregory XIII, who “suspended the Cardinal’s income.” Fontana continued to work on the project, however, using his own money to fund the chapel. I believe this kind of commitment impressed Sixtus, because, as Dibner writes, upon his election to the papacy, Sixtus immediately repaid Fontana and hired him as the papal architect. Fontana’s dedication to the projects he undertook for Sixtus may be among the reasons why Sixtus chose him as the sole architect for the movement of the Vatican obelisk.
square, twenty-four feet deep area of ground was excavated and strengthened by oak and pine pylons driven eighteen feet into the bottom of the pit. The sunken pylons were then covered with chestnut beams, and the pit was filled with concrete made of basalt, lime, and pozzolana (volcanic ash). The ground under the obelisk, though, was not the only area that required preparation. The area surrounding the piazza was cleared of houses and any other element that would have blocked entry to the piazza.

To fully appreciate the accomplishment that was achieved by Sixtus and Fontana by moving the obelisk, we have to understand the difficulty of the task and the kind of resources available during that time. After the ground had been prepared, Fontana set to work on building two towers of oak near the monument, which would be used to support the pulleys and ropes needed to lower and raise the obelisk (Figure 21). Each tower contained four inner, vertical columns, which were ninety-two feet high, with each inner column made of four wood poles measuring 20 x 20 inches square. Iron bolts and bands held the poles together, as shown in an engraving in Fontana’s book (Figure 22). The iron bands had two purposes: to hold the tower together and to provide a place for the ropes to be threaded through in order to create a pulley system. Fontana’s design allowed the tower to be disassembled and reassembled in a different location.

Fontana calculated the height and force needed to move the obelisk based on its volume and dimensions, recording that it was 83 feet high (tapering from 9 feet 2 inches square at the base to 5 feet 11 inches square at the top) and that the pyramidion was 4 feet

182 Iversen, *Exile*, 31. Dibner, *Moving*, 28, states that there was more than one layer of concrete distributed in the hole. According to Dibner, the first layer of concrete consisted of finely crushed basalt, flint, brick, and stone cement, while the second layer was a mixture of lime and clay. I believe Dibner’s account to be the more accurate because it reflects greater understanding of the concrete.

This is one of the largest obelisks in Rome. Fontana was able to move the weight of the obelisk by using capstans that were pulled by horses. For each capstan, there were four horses; in all, he needed forty capstans and one hundred and sixty horses to hold most of the weight of the obelisk. Fontana made an engraving that shows the placement of each of these horses and the five wooden levers that held the remaining weight (Figure 23). Much of the pulling was dependent on the ropes holding this weight. Fontana surely paid extra attention to them knowing that if one broke the entire obelisk could shatter. Together the pulleys, horses, and timber scaffolding had to support 737,690 pounds of weight. According to Fontana, to ensure there was no breakage or uneven distribution of the weight, he placed watchmen all around the work area to signal if the ropes appeared to be holding too much weight or if any hitches occurred during the movement. Over the years the obelisk had acquired some cracks. As a result, Fontana had to be especially careful with the damaged areas to ensure the structural integrity of the stone. This may explain why Fontana thought it was necessary to drape the obelisk with fabric to cushion for the many ropes required to move the giant monument.

Lowering the obelisk began on 30 April 1586. At 2 a.m., before the lowering began, all the workmen, watchmen, and architects attended Mass and held prayer. The specificity of Fontana’s records concerning his details of the many stages in the erection of the obelisk suggests just how important a successful outcome was for Sixtus as well as for the Church and the city. Everyone in Rome attended the affair; the piazza was filled

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184 Ibid., 29, for the measurements recorded in Fontana’s book. For a height comparison with other obelisks, see Figure 30.
185 Ibid., 30.
186 Ibid., 31.
187 Iversen, Exile, 32.
with Italian nobles, the College of Cardinals, city officials, and foreign dignitaries. It was one of the most daring art projects undertaken during the Renaissance, and Fontana’s success would mark a historic moment. Once everyone was situated in place, Fontana led the crowd in one final prayer.\(^\text{188}\)

In the long process of lowering the obelisk, the first task was to raise the obelisk two feet above its pedestal. Once the obelisk was suspended above the pedestal, the astragals (moldings) were removed, leaving the obelisk hanging in the air. This task proved difficult. Because the astragals weighed about 600 pounds each, it took workers four days to remove them, and some had to be cut loose.\(^\text{189}\) Fontana recorded in his book that prior to lifting the monolith, he noticed it was uneven. After it was lifted, the bottom of the obelisk was straightened so that the shaft would stand perfectly vertical. It seems the bottom of this monolith was uneven due to an earlier mishap. In his *Natural History*, Pliny stated that it was “the only one of them all [obelisks] broken in carriage.”\(^\text{190}\)

According to Dibner, Fontana compared the measurements of the Vatican obelisk “with equivalent measurements and ratios of other obelisks in Rome, [and] pointed out that the ratio of the height of the pyramidal top to its base is in fact only half of the ratio of that of the others.”\(^\text{191}\) Fontana’s measurements indicate the obelisk was originally taller, supporting Pliny’s statement.

On 7 May 1586 the obelisk was lowered horizontally to the ground. An iron collar was placed around the obelisk with a moveable strut to create an axis for the obelisk to

\(^\text{188}\) Dibner, *Moving*, 33.
\(^\text{189}\) Iversen, *Exile*, 33. The astragals were partly reused on the new obelisk base. See the discussion of the astragals in the text that follows.
\(^\text{190}\) Pliny, XXXVI.LXV.
\(^\text{191}\) Dibner, *Moving*, 34.
move around.\textsuperscript{192} This aided in moving the obelisk from a vertical position to a horizontal one. The system of pulleys that had been used to lift the obelisk had to be taken off the eastward side and switched to the other three sides, since the east side was the side being lowered to the ground.\textsuperscript{193} Then, four blocks with ropes running through them were positioned at the foot of the obelisk.\textsuperscript{194} This was to ensure that the obelisk would not crack at the bottom from stress and to aid the struts in moving the obelisk to its horizontal position. By the end of the day, the obelisk had been completely lowered and placed on its carriage (Figure 24).\textsuperscript{195} Then, over a month later, on 13 June, the obelisk was moved along the causeway into the square of Saint Peter’s, as depicted in the engravings (Figures 25, 26).

The next couple of days were used to move the towers to the new erection site and to uncover the old pedestal upon which the obelisk had been set.\textsuperscript{196} Fontana wished to use parts of the old pedestal in the new pedestal, but he had to affix new astragals.\textsuperscript{197} The new pedestal was composed of pieces from the old one, with a new stone added between two lower layers of marble: inscribed on the new stone were the names of Fontana and Sixtus and an account of the transportation of the obelisk.\textsuperscript{198} Once the obelisk base was complete and in place, the last and final task was to raise the moved obelisk into position

\textsuperscript{192} Iversen, \textit{Exile}, 33.
\textsuperscript{193} Dibner, \textit{Moving}, 34.
\textsuperscript{194} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{195} Iversen, \textit{Exile}, 33, states that the obelisk had been lowered and affixed to its carriage by 4 p.m., while Dibner argues that this was not accomplished till 10 p.m. Both, however, recount that the architect was followed to his home in Rome that night by a band of trumpeters to honor this accomplishment.
\textsuperscript{196} For more information on how the pedestal was uncovered, see Dibner, \textit{Moving the Obelisks}, 36-37.
\textsuperscript{197} Ibid., 33, 34, 37, 40. Fontana reused the bronze from the old astragals. Dibner has suggested that it was used for the lions, created by Prospero Bresciano, which were placed at the base of the obelisk. Iversen, \textit{Exile}, 33, believed the old astragals were placed behind the lions on the base. When I studied the obelisk in Rome, I did not see any evidence of the old astragals placed behind the bronze lions. In my opinion, Iversen was mistaken about the old astragals and Dibner is correct in assuming that the bronze from these was reused for the lions.
\textsuperscript{198} Dibner, \textit{Moving}, 37.
in front of Saint Peter’s, where it would have the backdrop of the church containing the relics of the saint who gazed upon this obelisk as he died.

On the morning of 10 September 1586 everything was in place to begin the raising of the obelisk. The workmen had all attended prayer and the trumpets sounded to begin the raising process. Fontana had built a special command tower for himself at the east end of the ramp to better oversee the procedure. The raising went smoothly. By the evening of that day the obelisk had been successfully hoisted above its new pedestal. On the following day, the carriage was removed and the obelisk was affixed to the pedestal using blocks and wedges. The capstans were tightened and newly gilded bronze lions were placed under the obelisk (Figure 27). These lions have allegorical significance for the church and the obelisk. According to Michele Mercati (1541-1593), the geologist, botanist, and physician, who dedicated his treatise on obelisks to Sixtus V, they “demonstrated how the ferocity and arrogance of the Gentiles had been suppressed by true religion, as the lions were by the obelisk.”

By 28 September 1586, Fontana and his workmen had cleared away all the scaffolding, towers, and ropes from the square. It was consecrated by the Pope Sixtus V, who purged the stone of its pagan ties. The ceremony was done in two parts: the first purified the obelisk of its pagan past and the second exorcized any remaining pagan demons that might have been housed in the stone. An inscription on the eastern side of the pedestal is inscribed with the following text:

ECCE CRVX DOMINI

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199 Ibid., 40.
200 Iversen, Exile, 37, for the reference to Michele Mercati, De gli obelischi di Roma (Rome: Domenico Basa, 1589), 369.
FVGITE
PARTES ADVERSAE
VICIT LEO
DE TRIBV IVDA

For all the workmen, families, and dignitaries, a mass was held in an adjoining church, where the cross that would adorn the new obelisk was blessed by the bishop. The cross was then carried in procession to the obelisk. To commemorate this event there is an inscription at the top of the obelisk below the pyramidion, on the western side of the obelisk. The Latin inscription refers to the year of its erection and to the consecration of the obelisk in Saint Peter’s square:

SANCTISSIMAE CRVCI SIXTVS V. PONT. MAX. CONSECRAVIT E PRIORE SEDE AVVLSVM
ET CAESS. AVG. TIB. I (stum) L(apidem) ABLATVM MDLXXXVI.

All of the inscriptions were originally gilded, as were all the ornaments on top of the obelisk. Finally, the cross was affixed to the top of the pyramidion to solidify the new Christian purpose of the obelisk. Placed directly beneath the cross was the insignia of Sixtus V: three mountains and a star (Figure 28). In a drawing dated 1595-1606, made by an anonymous Italian artist before the new façade was completed, one can see the front of Saint Peter’s with the obelisk installed in the square (Figure 29).

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201 Ibid., 38, in n. 4, Iversen translates the text as follows: “See the cross of the Lord! Flee adversaries, the Lion of Juda has conquered.”

202 Ibid., 38-39. Iverson writes that everyone who attended this ceremony was granted indulgences, the duration of which was ten years.

203 Ibid., 39, n. 2. Iversen’s translation follows: “Sixtus V consecrated to the most holy Cross this stone torn away and stolen from its original place under Augustus and Tiberius Caesar.” The inscription must have been completed by 26 September 1586, the date of the exorcism ceremony.
On the southern side of the pedestal there is an inscription that stresses the effort it took to move this stone, as well as the religious significance of installing it in Saint Peter’s square:

SIXTVS V PONT. MAX. / OBELISCVM VATICANVM / DIS GENTIVM / IMPIO CVLTV DICATVM / AD APOSTOLORVM LIMINA / OPEROSO LABORE TRANSTVLIT / ANNO MD LXXXVI. PONT. II. 204

On the northern side of the pedestal, the inscription emphasizes its Christian purification and dedication:

SIXTVS V PONT. MAX. / CRVCI INVICTAE / OBELISCVM VATICANVM / AB IMPVRA SVPERSTITIONIS / EXPIATVM IVSTIVS / ET FELICIVS CONSECRAVIT / ANNO MD LXXXVI. PONT. II. 205

The cutting of all these inscriptions was done by Luca Orfeo of Fano, who was another favorite artist of Sixtus V. 206 Luca Orfeo had created a new Christian alphabet that was based on the Latin inscriptions of imperial Rome. The new alphabet was solely for inscriptions on Christian monuments. These inscriptions alluded to the everlasting reign of Jesus and included ecclesiastical symbols to signify Christianity’s triumph over malicious powers. 207

Fontana had accomplished an astounding achievement, for which he was made a Palantine Count and a Knight of the Golden Spur; he was also awarded 2,000 scudi (large

204 Ibid., 40. In this text, Iverson included this translation of the inscription on the pedestal’s southern side. “By laborious efforts Sixtus V removed the Vatican obelisk, formerly dedicated to the impious cult of pagan gods, to the threshold of the Apostles.”
205 Iversen, Exile, 40, Iversen translated the Latin inscription on the pedestal’s northern side as follows: “Sixtus V consecrated the Vatican obelisk, expiated from impious superstition, more justly and appropriately to the invincible Cross.”
206 Ibid. Sixtus V favored Domenico Fontana and Luca Orfreo, who had worked with him before he became pope.
207 Pastor, Popes, XXII, 263.
silver coins) and all the wood used during the movement of the obelisk to the square. To further honor the architect, his name was inscribed on the eastern part of the pedestal:

DOMINICVS FONTANA EX PAGO MILI / AGRI NOVOCOMENSIS
TRANSTVLIT / ET EREXIT. 208

From this time on, Domenico Fontana was considered a highly regarded architect. However, by today’s measurements, the obelisk is not in the center of Saint Peter’s square, nor is it on the axis of the church. 209 The error is often attributed to Carlo Maderno (ca. 1556-1629), who was Domenico Fontana’s nephew and the architect who was placed in charge of designing a new façade for Saint Peter’s. However, regardless of the cause, these deviations do not minimize the architectural feat reached by Fontana.

After completing the installation of the Vatican obelisk, Fontana received several more architectural commissions, including the installation of three other obelisks in Rome that Sixtus V wished to relocate. The first relocation project was the obelisk that Fontana placed in the Piazza del Popolo: this obelisk is roughly three feet shorter than the Vatican obelisk and weighs about 235 tons. The second obelisk was placed behind the church of Santa Maria Maggiore and in front of the gate leading to the Esquiline Hill: this obelisk is about 31.5 feet tall, with a pedestal measuring 17 feet high, making the entire structure over 48 feet tall. 210 In the third relocation project, Fontana moved the tallest obelisk in Rome, measuring about 150 feet with its pedestal, to the Piazza di San Giovanni in Laterno.

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208 This inscription reads: Domenico Fontana, from the city of Mili (Melide), in a new district by Como, transported and erected [the obelisk].
209 Giovanni Pietro Bellori (1613-1696) notes this in his biography on Fontana; see Iversen, Exile, 37.
210 Krautheimer, Alexander VII, 90, states that the obelisk was placed on the center line of the spina (block of houses in the middle of the Borgo) not the center line of the church.
210 Dibner, Moving, 41.
With the help of Domenico Fontana, Pope Sixtus V was able to create new major axes through Rome to connect the main pilgrimage churches. Unlike Nicholas V, who focused on reshaping the Borgo, Sixtus V concentrated his efforts on the earlier Christian churches. His urban corridors were intended to link Santa Maria del Popolo (and the Piazza del Popolo) at the northern end of Rome with Santa Maria Maggiore at Rome’s center.\textsuperscript{211} Sixtus also built a road from San Giovanni in Laterno to the Colosseum and a road that led from the Maggiore to San Lorenzo for pilgrims journeying to the church.

The four obelisks (Figure 30) placed in front of major pilgrimage churches signify the Christian triumph over paganism.\textsuperscript{212} Sixtus V chose the four churches based on pilgrimage routes of the Middle Ages, especially those paths traveled by pilgrims during a Jubilee year (Figure 31). During Jubilee years, the antiquities of Rome and the relics of saints drew large crowds to the city.\textsuperscript{213} Among the most popular and visited medieval churches was Santa Maria Maggiore (Saint Mary Major), which was where Fontana erected the second obelisk for Sixtus. This church is near the Porta Maggiore, the original pilgrimage entrance into the city of Rome.\textsuperscript{214} Next, Fontana erected an obelisk near the most important pilgrimage church in Rome, the Cathedral of San Giovanni in Laterano (Saint John of the Lateran), a church with an old and rich history.\textsuperscript{215}

\textsuperscript{211} Santa Maria Maggiore is a Franciscan church that was important to Pope Sixtus V.
\textsuperscript{212} The obelisk at Santa Maria Maggiore was intended to be a visual reminder that Christ was born during the reign of Emperor Augustus.
\textsuperscript{213} Kessler, \textit{Rome 1300}, 21.
\textsuperscript{214} Ibid., 10. The city gate near Porta Santa Maggiore was made to resemble the gates of Jerusalem, making a connection between Rome and the city of Christ and his apostles. This church is also known by its piazza, the Piazza del Esquilino.
\textsuperscript{215} The Lateran had been an imperial castle during Constantine’s reign; after his death, it was given to Pope Miltiades (ca. 311-14). Built like a Roman palace, it provided the first residence of the pope. See Kessler, \textit{Rome 1300}, 13.
Domenico Fontana sought after and located two obelisks: the Lateran obelisk and the Popolo obelisk, both of which were in the Circus Maximus. To find them, Fontana probed the Circus with iron bars, and came upon these two obelisks. Both obelisks were broken into three pieces, but Fontana was able to reassemble them, using stone dovetail mortises.

The Lateran obelisk had been taken to Rome in the middle of the fourth century by Constantius II, Constantine’s son. The idea that an obelisk could be used to represent the triumph of Christianity was stressed by Nicholas V and subsequently Sixtus V, as shown in his obelisk projects. The idea of using objects taken from others as symbols of triumph occurred before Nicholas V and was a practice of pre-Christian Rome. Often the ancient Romans used monuments from conquered lands as spoila, or treasures of war. While spoila represented Roman triumph over another culture, the obelisk was an especially effective type of spoila because of its monumental scale. For the triumph over Egypt, Emperor Augustus removed several of these spoila from Egypt to be re-erected in Rome, where they symbolized the great Egyptian kingdom that had been conquered.

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216 Dibner, Moving, 41.
217 Habachi, Skyscrapers of the Past, 115, notes that the Lateran obelisk’s origins are more debatable than that of the Vatican obelisk. Its original placement in Egypt is not recorded. After the obelisk had been standing in Egypt for about one thousand years, it was taken down and brought to Rome. According to Ammianus Marcellinus, the obelisk came from Karnak, from which Emperor Augustus wished to bring it to Rome. However, due to its large size Augustus was skeptical that this could be accomplished and abandoned the idea.
218 The reuse of obelisks for Christian meaning is not the only evidence of Egyptian spoila used by the Christians. See Kessler, Rome 1300, 17, who discusses the porphyry columns from Egypt that are now in the baptistery doors of the Lateran Palace.
The Lateran obelisk, as previously stated, was found broken into three sections and buried about twenty-three feet under the ground in the Circus Maximus.\(^\text{219}\) It took almost a year to piece the obelisk back together. On August 3, 1588, it was erected in the Piazza di San Giovanni in Laterano, two years after the erection of the Vatican obelisk. This obelisk was also topped with a cross and stood upon four gilded bronze lions.

The obelisk in the Piazza del Popolo was the final monolith erected by Sixtus V.\(^\text{220}\) It appears in Nicholas Beatrizet’s 1552 engraving of the Circus Maximus (Figure 32), the location of which is indicated on this section of Ligorio’s map of ancient Rome (Figure 33). Pope Sixtus V chose this particular obelisk for the piazza because he thought that it would be a memorable centerpiece for the entrance to the city of Rome from the north.\(^\text{221}\) A section of the shaft at the bottom of the obelisk was removed due to damage. However, the dedicatory inscription to Augustus was saved and placed on the new pedestal of the obelisk, which was erected in 1589.\(^\text{222}\) This obelisk created a bridge between Sixtus and Augustus, reinforcing Sixtus V’s desire to reshape this grand city under the newly-reformed Church.

The obelisk that Fontana erected behind the church of Santa Maria Maggiore, called the Esquilino obelisk, held special significance for Sixtus V. This obelisk was found among the ruins of the mausoleum of Augustus on the northern part of the Campus

\(^{219}\) Iversen, *Exile*, 60.
\(^{220}\) Ibid., 117. This obelisk is important because it was the first obelisk taken from Egypt. The great feat of moving this monument was considered so amazing that the obelisk-ship used to move it was put on display in the city of Rome for everyone to see. According to Pliny, the display was destroyed by fire about 10 years later. In 10 B.C., this obelisk was set up in the center of the Circus Maximus, where it was seen as a symbol of the sun, allegorically linking Augustus to Re. The obelisk was meant to commemorate Augustus’ triumph over the Egyptians. I propose that Pope Sixtus V likely saw this obelisk as important because it had been the first one transported to Rome.
\(^{221}\) Habachi, *Skyscrapers*, 119.
\(^{222}\) Ibid.
Martius. It had been brought to Rome along with the obelisk that would later be raised in the Piazza del Quirinale (in the 1700s). Both appear in Pirro Ligorio’s topographical map of ancient Rome, dated 1561, depicting the positions of the obelisks near the Mausoleum of Augustus (Figure 4).

Fontana began excavations of the Mausoleum of Augustus in March of 1587, and by 11 August, the Esquilino obelisk was erected near the church of Santa Maria Maggiore. The pedestal of this obelisk has a dedicatory inscription to the Virgin and the Nativity. The side facing the south has the following words:

CHRISTVS PER INVTAM CRVCEM POPVLO PACEM PRAEBEAT QVI AVGVSTI PACE IN PRAESEPE NASCI VOLVIT

The pedestal side that faces toward the north and Strada Felice is inscribed with these words:

CHRISTVM DOMINVM QVEM AVGVSTVS DE VIRGINE NASCITVRVM VIVENS ADORAVIT SEQ. DEINCEPS DOMINVM DICI VETVIT ADORO

On the east side is this inscription:

CHRISTI DEI IN AETERNVM VIVENTIS CVNABVLA LAETISSIME COLO QVI MORTVI SEPVLCRO AVGVSTI TRISTIS SERVIEBAM

The fourth inscription is the longest because it is the personal dedication of Pope Sixtus V. This is found on the side facing west:

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225 Iversen, Exile, 137. A cross was also affixed to the top of this obelisk and an inscription was placed on each side of the base. The inscriptions “were intended to harmonize the monument with its new surroundings,” Iversen, Exile, 52.

226 Ibid., 53. Iverson translates the inscription as follows: “Christ, deciding to appear in the manger during the time of Augustan peace, has given peace to mankind through the invincible Cross.”

227 Ibid. According to Iversen’s translation, “I adore the Lord Christ whom Augustus, when alive, adored as being born by a Virgin, afterwards refusing to be called Lord himself.”

228 Ibid. Iversen’s translation follows: “Overjoyed, I pay homage to the cradle of the ever-living God, Christ, having with sadness adorned the sepulcher of dead Augustus.”
This inscription is the most important because it was written by Sixtus. The translated text reads as follows: “Sixtus V, Sovereign Pontiff, ordered this obelisk, brought from Egypt, and dedicated to Augustus in his mausoleum, thereupon overturned and left broken in several pieces on the road to S. Rocco, to be erected here, restored to its former shape, and felicitously consecrated to the Cross.” All the inscriptions on the obelisk are important because they help to explain how Sixtus justified the reuse of these obelisks. By uniting them with Augustus, the obelisks are also tied to Christ since Augustus was alive during his birth. According to Jacobus de Voragine in the *Golden Legend*, the Tibertine Sibyl told Augustus about the birth of Christ, and Augustus dedicated an altar to the Virgin. Upon the altar he placed an inscription that honored Mary and Christ: “This is the altar of the son of the living God.” By placing inscriptions about the birth of Christ around the Santa Maria Maggiore obelisk, Sixtus imbued it with

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229 Ibid., 53.
230 Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, trans. and adapt by Granger Ryan and Helmut Ripperger (London, Longmans, Green & Co., 1941), 49. According to the legend, Octavian had established peace and the senate wished to pay him homage by making him a god. Before accepting this honor, he consulted his sibyl and asked if another man would surpass his greatness. On the day Jesus was born, the sibyl was alone with Augustus. At noon, she received a vision of gold emanating in a circle around the sun and inside the ring, she saw a Virgin holding a baby. The sibyl shared this vision with Augustus and said to him: “This woman is the Altar of Heaven (Ara Coeli!), this child will be greater than thou.” According to Voragine, after learning of the sibyl’s vision Augustus denied the Senate their request, knowing that he was only a mortal and not like this child.
Christian meaning. The pagan tradition of the obelisk was placed within Christian history, based on time-honored legends.
CONCLUSION

Based on my research of primary and secondary sources, I conclude that obelisks in Rome became visually and symbolically valuable for the reformed Catholic Church during the papacy of Pope Sixtus V. Relocating the Vatican obelisk from the side of Saint Peter’s to the square in front of the church had seemed an impossible task for the predecessors of Sixtus V. However, in 1586 the transportation and erection of the Vatican obelisk was accomplished through the brilliantly employed efforts of Sixtus’ architect, Domenico Fontana, who moved the gigantic, fragile obelisk to the center of Saint Peter’s square to glorify God and honor the apostle Peter. This was a major step in carrying out Sixtus V’s vision of urban planning, which involved creating roads through Rome linking major pilgrimage shrines. Fontana unearthed and erected three obelisks for Sixtus, each meant to be a permanent landmark symbolic of the history, endurance, and destiny of the reformed Catholic Church.

My research has shown that Sixtus’ plan gave homage to Emperor Augustus, who had moved large red granite monoliths from Egypt to the port of Ostia to begin an elaborate tradition of erecting the tall pinnacles in Rome to symbolize Roman triumphs and the glory and breadth of the empire. Yet, the story of the obelisk began with the Egyptian pharaohs who commissioned obelisks as symbols of unity with their gods and confirmation of the power of their rule.

The production of an obelisk was a long and tedious process that was perhaps best understood in sixteenth-century Rome by the architect Domenico Fontana. His heroic efforts of transporting and reinstalling obelisks gave his patron, Sixtus V, the platform for
reasserting the authority of the reformed Church. Through inscriptions, Sixtus fused
scripture, legend, and stories of Christ and his disciples to the pagan monuments. A web
of references was formed around the ancient Egyptian obelisks, linking them and their
time to the time of Christ and making the obelisks irreplaceable relics appropriated to
serve the reformed Catholic Church.
Figure 1. Vatican Obelisk, photograph by Christy Beckett, 2008.
Figure 2. The Martyrdom of Saint Peter, 14th century, fresco, north wall, Basilica of San Pietro a Grado, Pisa, Italy.
Figure 3. Crusifixion of Saint Peter, ca. 1277-1280, fresco, Sancta Sanctorum, San Giovanni in Laterno, Rome, Italy.
Figure 4. Pirro Ligorio, Reconstruction of Ancient Rome, showing the Mausoleum of Augustus (top), the Mausoleum of Hadrian (bottom), and Tomb of Romulus (bottom), 1561, engraving.
Figure 5. Rodolfo Lanciani, Reconstruction of Medieval Rome, color lithograph, 1893-1901, 4.6 x 6.9 cm.
Figure 6. Antonio Tempesta, Map of Rome, showing the area of the Vatican in 1593, engraving, 53 x 39 cm.
Figure 7. Francesco Colonna, Invented hieroglyphs, woodcut, fol. C I, Hypnerotomachia Poliphili (Venice, 1499).
Figure 8. Francesco Colonna, Ancient temple with obelisk of Caesar, woodcut, fol. P III, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (Venice, 1499).
Figure 9. Francesco Colonna, Inscription from the obelisk of Caesar, woodcut, fol. P VI, verso, Hypnerotomachia Poliphili (Venice, 1499).
Figure 10. Map of the Nile (from the Mediterranean) and the Red Sea, Egypt.
Figure 11. Unfinished obelisk from Aswan, n.d, photograph by Brian Curran, from Obelisk: A History (Cambridge, Mass., 2009).
Figure 12. Pounder from Beni Hasan, Egypt, Middle Kingdom, dolerite, 25.5 cm, British Museum.
Figure 13. Aswan obelisk barge, drawing based on a relief sculpture in Hatshepsut’s Mortuary Temple, dated ca. 1500, relief sculpture drawing, Deir-el Bahri, Egypt.
Figure 14. Reginald Engelbach, Didactic models showing the hypothetical moving and raising of an obelisk in New Kingdom Egypt, from The Problem of the Obelisks from a Study of the Unfinished Obelisk at Aswan (New York, 1923); this image from Curran, et al., Obelisk: A History, page 31 (Cambridge, Mass., 2009).
Figure 15. Giovanni Pinadello, (apud. Franciscum Zannettum) *Sixtus V Surrounded by Images of his Building Projects*, fol. 3, 1589, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
Figure 16. Antonio Lafreri, Pilgrims Visiting the Seven Churches of Rome during the Holy Year of 1575, c. 1575, engraving, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
Figure 17. Domenico Fontana, Frontispiece, engraving, fol. 1, *Della trasportatione dell’obelisco vaticano* (Rome, 1590).
Figure 18. Domenico Fontana, Proposals, engraving, fol. 8, *Della trasportatione dell’obelisco vaticano* (Rome, 1590).
Figure 19. Domenico Fontana, *Concordia* (detail), engraving, fol. 15, *Della trasportazione dell’obelisco vaticano* (Rome, 1590).
Figure 20. Pirro Ligorio, Map of Ancient Rome, 1552, engraving, 40.2 x 54.5 cm.
Figure 21. Domenico Fontana, Obelisk lowering, engraving, fol. 18, Della trasportatione dell’obelisco vaticano (Rome, 1590).
Figure 22. Domenico Fontana, Clamps and ropes (detail), engraving, fol. 26, *Della trasportatione dell’obelisco vaticano* (Rome, 1590).
Figure 23. Domenico Fontana, Horse capstan pulley system stations, engraving, fol. 15, *Della trasportazione dell’obelisco vaticano* (Rome, 1590).
Figure 24. Domenico Fontana, Lowering the obelisk onto its transport, engraving, fol. 20, *Della trasportatione dell’obelisco vaticano* (Rome, 1590).
Figure 25. Domenico Fontana, Obelisk moving to new erection site, engraving, fol. 24, *Della transportatione dell’obelisco vaticano* (Rome, 1590).
Figure 27. Natale Bonifacio, after Giovanni Guerra, detail of the lions, *Consecration of the Cross on the Obelisk*, engraving (Rome, 1587).
Figure 28. Natale Bonifacio, after Giovanni Guerra, detail of the mountains and cross, *Consecration of the Cross on the Obelisk*, engraving (Rome, 1587).
Figure 29. Anonymous Italian, *The Piazza San Pietro in Rome*, 1595-1606, pen and brown ink wash over graphite, 25.9 x 79.2 cm, British Museum, London.
Figure 30. Jacqueline Kordinak, Obelisks of Sixtus V, after Labib Habachi’s, *Twelve Obelisks of Rome* (New York, 1977).
Figure 31. Unknown artist, Map of Rome, 1599, engraving, 11.8 x 17.2 cm (author has labeled on the map the four obelisks raised by Sixtus V, and the sites of the Circus Maximus, Tomb of Romulus, Mausoleum of Augustus, and Tomb of Remus).

A = San Pietro obelisk  
B = Santa Maria del Popolo obelisk  
C = San Giovanni in Laterano obelisk  
D = Santa Maria Maggiore obelisk  
E = Circus Maximus  
F = Tomb of Romulus  
G = Mausoleum of Augustus  
H = Tomb of Remus
Figure 32. Nicholas Beatrizet, after Pirro Ligorio, *Circus Maximus*, 1552, engraving, 38.1 x 56.1 cm.
Figure 3. Pirro Ligorio, Map of Ancient Rome, showing the Testaccio, the Antoine Baths, and the Tomb of Remus, 1561, engraving.
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